

Dollops of feedback

Rebecca Ratu

The most powerful single moderator that enhances achievement is feedback. The simplest prescription for improving education must be "dollops of feedback" -- providing information how and why the child understands and misunderstands, and what directions the student must take to improve (Hattie, 2008')

Why feedback?

At the end of each lesson I look over at the pile of books that lie in the corrections box with a mixture of frustration and urgency. Immediate feedback is essential; however, I wonder if I have successfully analysed the quality of the feedback I give. Is the time spent poring over student work books the best use of my time? Are students benefiting from my feedback? How can I ensure my feedback is looked at by students and used to move their learning forward? Despite my many questions I am certain that feedback is crucial to teaching and learning. and I want to examine how the giving and receiving of feedback could be improved in my classroom.

Let the research begin...

I began by asking my Year 4 students what they thought feedback was.

'Feedback is way of telling a person or thing what they did well and what they can improve on' Adam

'Feedback is like getting results from someone. We work on our feedback to improve' Charlize

'Feedback is being told what we have done well and what we can improve on next time' Georgia

'Feedback is getting comments on our work so we can do it better next time' Imogen

'Feedback is advice about our work' Brianna

The responses were safe, yet honest. Despite the predictability of answers, there were some responses that prompted further discussions and interest.

'Feedback is what you would write on someone's work when they are done. It tells them what to improve' Sienna

'Feedback is learning from your mistakes' Aidan

I was concerned that many students believed that feedback is only given when work is completed, and that feedback centres on negative elements of work - errors or mistakes. When probed a little further many also believed that feedback is predominately given by teachers and only in written form.

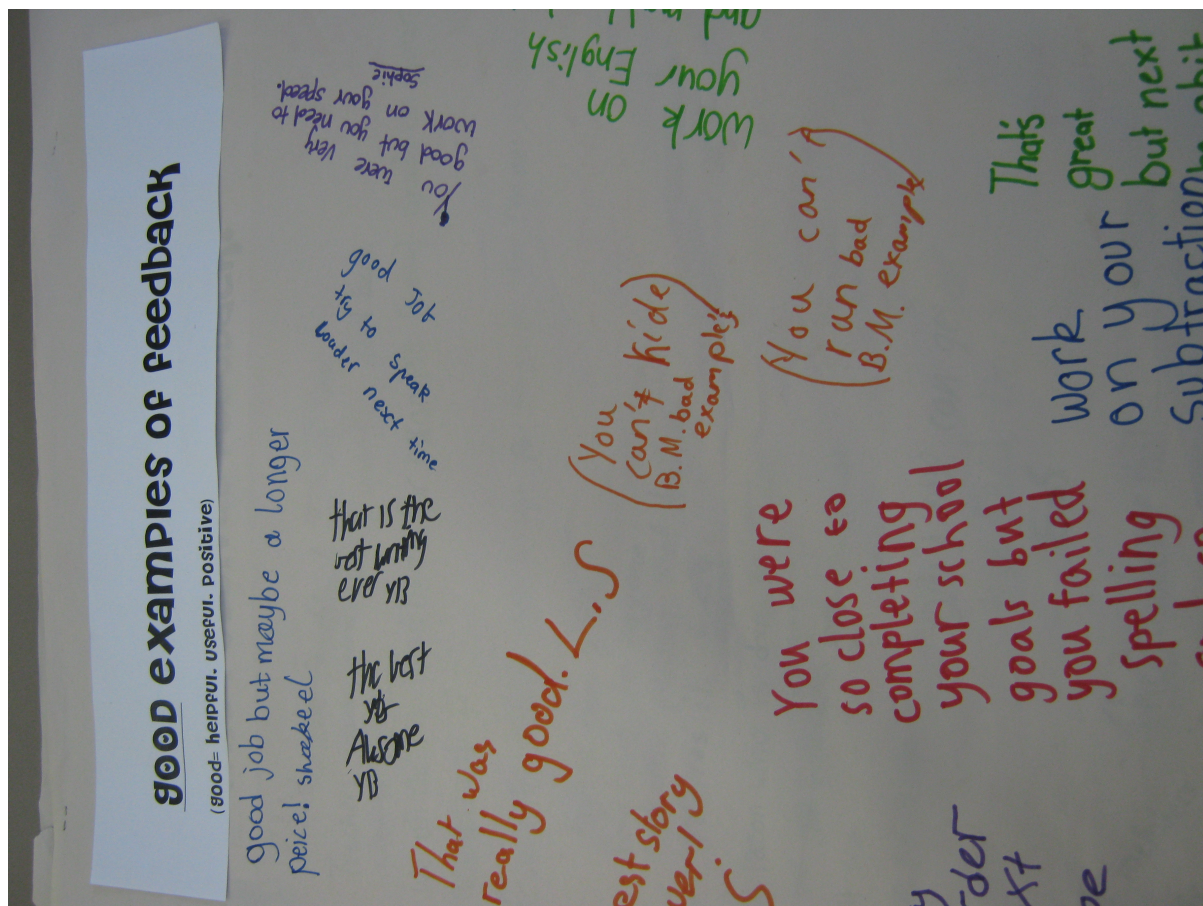
We discussed these thoughts further using a 'circle time' session. We shared occasions where feedback / advice had been given during a task rather than after its completion. We also discussed situations where other people, besides their teachers, had shared feedback and constructive criticism. Once reminded, the students realised these two things happened often, although at times played a less obvious role than that of teacher feedback. Whilst this was the reality, it did not mean that self-assessment and peer feedback were any less important or beneficial.

Changing student views on feedback

This discussion highlighted my first major challenge- to shift the mindset of my students about feedback.

I decided to ask students to answer some more feedback related questions to help inform what to do next. I placed a large poster on each table group with an essential question. The students rotated around each table and wrote their thoughts and opinions, which could be anonymous or include a name. I explained that these responses would be displayed in our classroom and would be used to guide improvements in our dialogue about feedback. The questions were 'What is the purpose of feedback?', 'Who gives and receives feedback?' and 'What do we do with feedback given?' In addition I asked students to record examples of what they thought good and bad feedback looked like.

I began by revisiting our discussion about feedback. I explained that I wanted students to be involved in using feedback more effectively with them, with others, as well as themselves. I wanted their thoughts on aspects of this idea before we delved any further. Some examples are below.



Figures 1, 2 & 3: Student responses to essential questions focussing on elements of feedback

Surprisingly the students struggled most when asked to give examples of good and bad feedback. Examples of positive feedback from my students' perspective included-

'Try harder next time'

'I love it!'

'Best story ever!'

'You were so close'.

Unhelpful feedback, also branded bad or negative by my students, were not that different.

'That piece of work needs to be improved'

'You need to put more effort into your work'

'Incorrect'

It was obvious that I needed to spend more time involving my students in further discourse about feedback. Many saw positive praise or reassuring comments as 'good feedback'. A discussion to distinguish between praise and feedback was needed.

Is praise helpful when it supplements feedback? My students seemed to think so.

'I like it when you say well done, it makes me feel good'

'Being told I've done well helps my confidence'

'When you say something nice and give me no feedback it might mean I don't need to improve anything else'

Praise vs feedback

I used the Think-Pair-Share routine (Ritchhart, Church & Morrison, 2011) to discuss the notion of praise vs feedback. I asked students to think about similarities and differences between praise and feedback, using a Venn diagram, and about giving and receiving such reflections. Following their independent thinking, they discussed with a partner then shared as a class.

Prior to the discussion I reflected on the role of praise and feedback. I turned to the work of Brophy (1981)ⁱⁱ who believes that praise is recommended as a reinforcement method for teachers as it can build self-esteem and provide encouragement to the students. He also attributes close student and teacher relationships with the giving of praise. In contrast however, he believes that giving praise has the potential of creating dependence rather than the ability to think for themselves. These beliefs were echoed by Martin(1977)ⁱⁱⁱ and Stringer & Hurt (1981)^{iv} who found that praise can actually lessen self-motivation.

My reading continued to be varied and thought provoking. I firmly believe that there is a place for praise; however, praise alone can't provide adequate opportunity for students to move forward or action necessary changes. I decided to think about this notion from a student's perspective.

'The main difference between praise and feedback is you can't act on praise because it is just a nice comment' - Sally

'Praise is useless unless it gives us something to use as a guide' William

Through collaboration with my students I decided to continue offering praise to meet their need for confidence, self-esteem and motivation, but use the work of Burnett (2001)^v who suggests that if teachers meet students' preferences for praise they will often give private effort feedback alongside it.

I decided to monitor this combination via a small sample group throughout this process. I intended to take note of students' initial views on feedback vs praise, and compare their reactions and impact on learning when given a combination of praise and feedback on various tasks over a term.

Initial thoughts on praise vs feedback

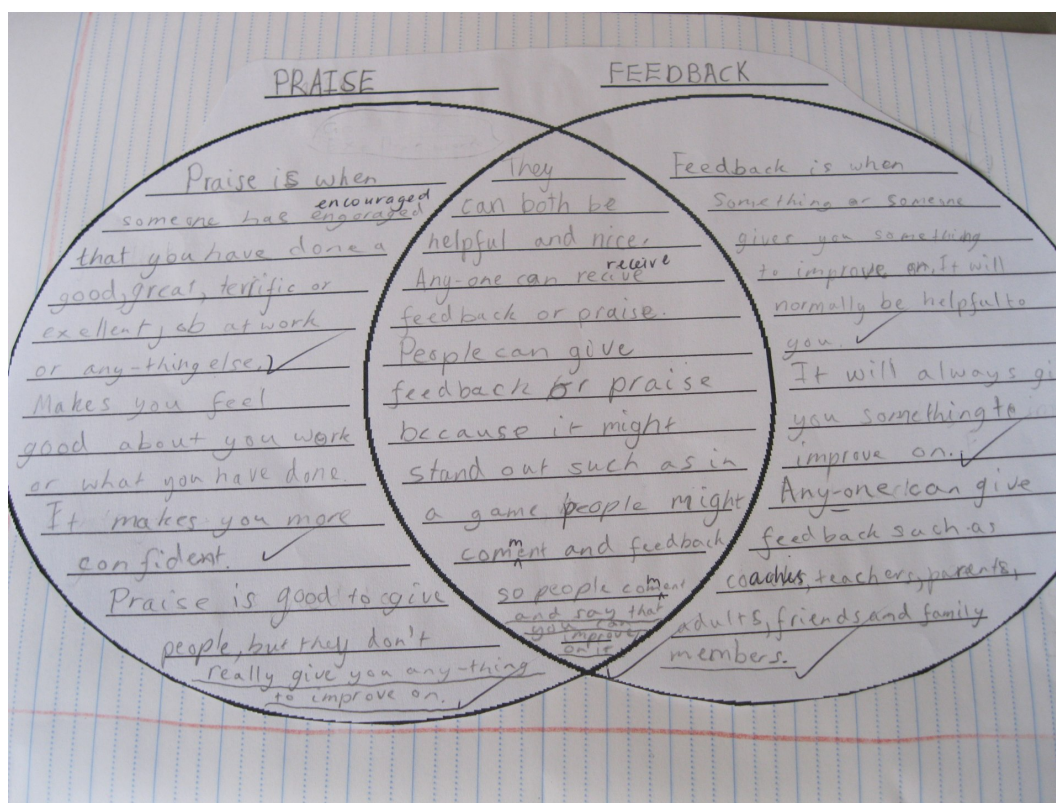
'Praise and feedback both usually contain something nice' - Adam

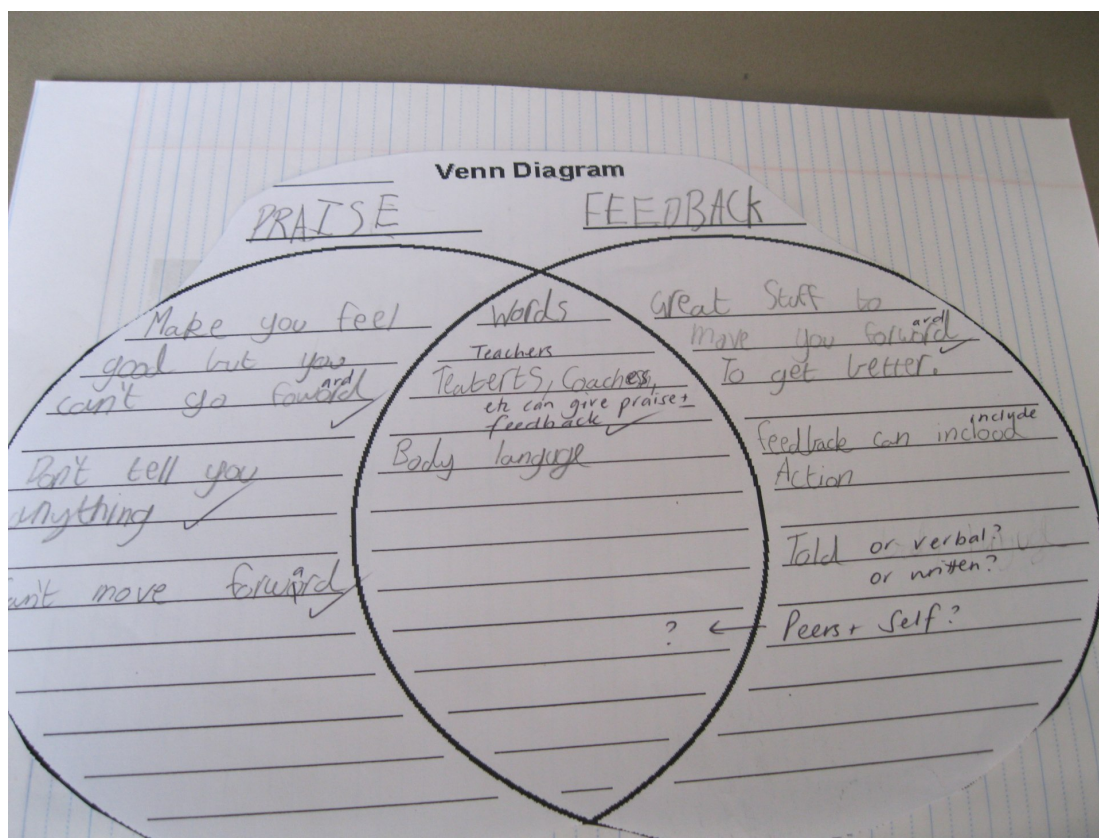
'Praise and feedback can be given by anyone' - Sally

'Praise is something that will light up your day, feedback on the other hand tells us what we can do better next time' - Charlyze

'Praise makes me feel happy and proud, but feedback is more helpful' Tegan

'Praise does not help me move forward. It doesn't include something that involves an action. Feedback is more important' Aidan





Figures 4 & 5- The photographs above show the use of a Venn diagram to highlight the similarities and differences between praise and feedback

Unpacking praise and feedback further

After a term of receiving praise and feedback I wanted students to reflect on the use of feedback and praise to assist their learning.

I decided to publish a set of feedback examples and ask students to group them into 'helpful' or 'unhelpful' sets. My intention was to explicitly discuss what would and would not be of benefit in way of feedback (and praise). I hoped that this would provide students with additional reasoning behind the integral part feedback plays in their achievement and success.

The students enjoyed looking over these examples. After a brief discussion we agreed that helpful feedback could also be good, positive and meaningful. I was very impressed with how students made their decisions and verbalised their thoughts. Whilst I disagreed with some of their insights, I was pleased by the attempts made to interpret and categorise the examples given.

'Excellent job might mean I have nothing more to work on. It might mean that I have met all the criteria of that task'

'Great job makes me feel good and that makes me confident'

In contrast, many made stark discoveries.

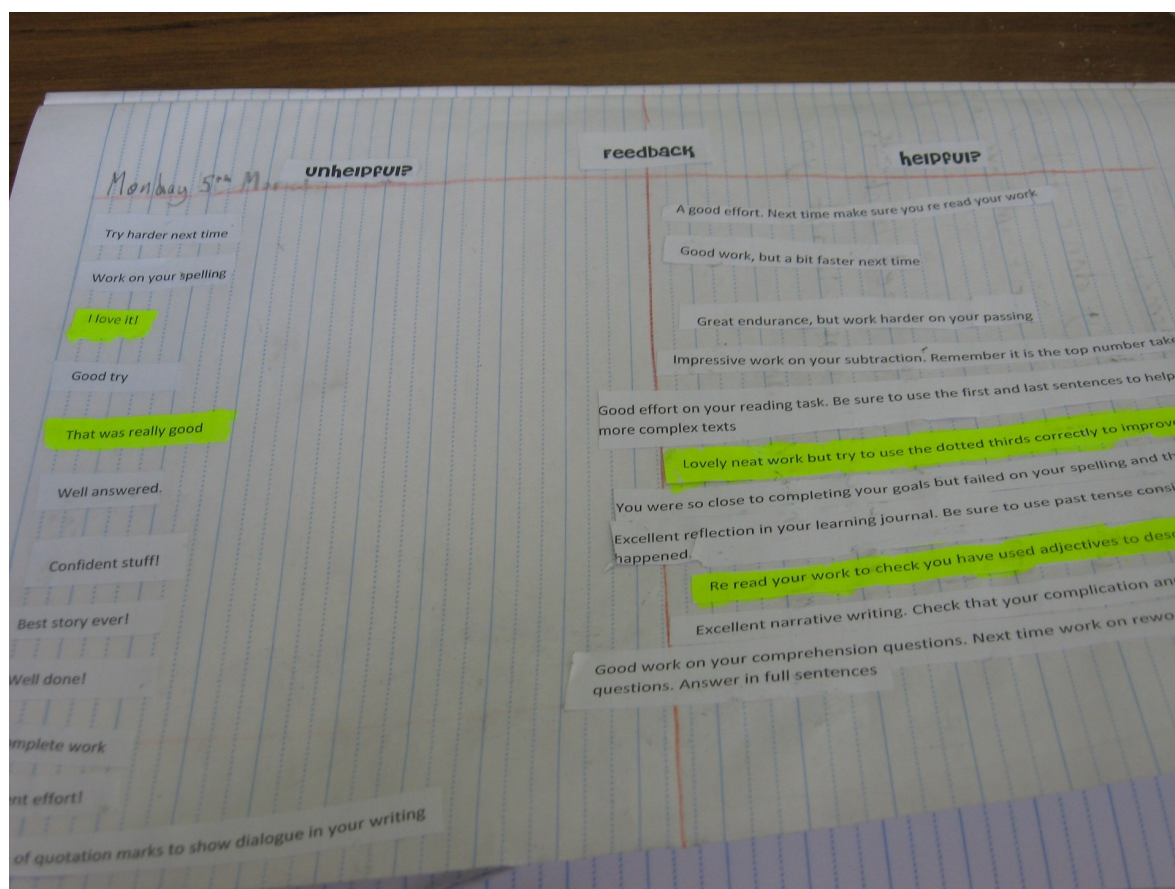
'I think that feedback is always helpful, anything that gives us advice is helpful'

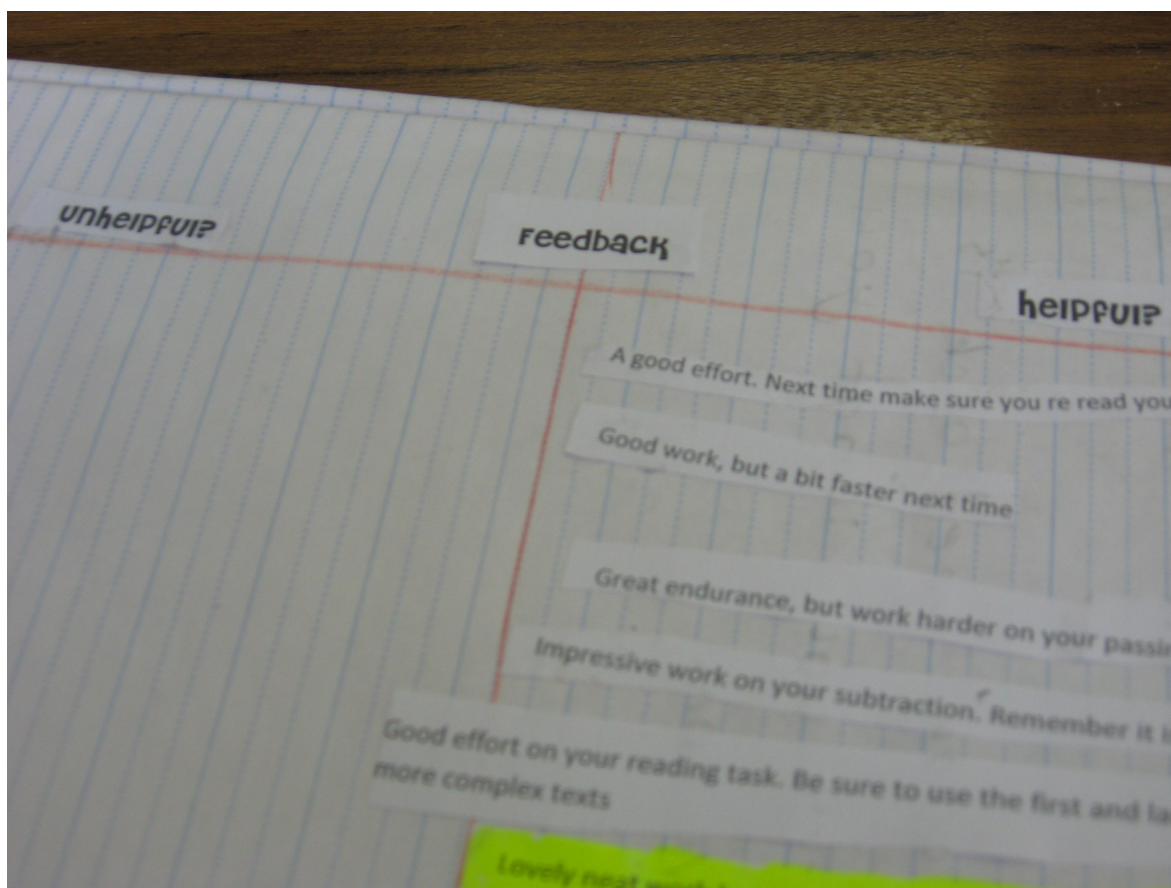
'Nice short words don't tell us anything. It is not good enough just to tell us something nice'

'Praise can sometimes be helpful but it's not helpful to help us move forward'

'Statements alone are unhelpful. That gives us no direction'

'Try harder next time could mean we change things we actually did well. If we don't know specifically how and what to do differently how can improve?'





Figures 6 & 7: Student attempts to categorise and justify statements as being feedback or praise

It was clear that my students held the same beliefs as the findings of Elwell & Tiberio's (1994)^{vi}. This research into praise, using a sample of 747 students aged 8–12, indicated that 91% of students preferred to be praised often or sometimes, while on average, only 9% reported that they never wanted praise. It was found that most students (84%) preferred to be praised for trying hard or putting in effort, rather than for having good ability (16%).

This study emphasises the importance placed on praise by students, yet poses a challenge of combining such statements with useful feedback, allowing students to move forward with their learning and address areas of need. It is my role to ensure I provide students with both praise and feedback; however, in doing so to also provide them with tools for self-reflection and devising their own plans and goals to move themselves forward. Effective feedback is much more complex than the combination of positive and constructive comments. I needed to continue to explore what areas of this notion could make the biggest influence on student achievement.

Effective feedback must answer three major questions, where am I going?
How am I going? And Where to next? (Hattie, 2002)^{vii}

Structuring my feedback

My next trial was to examine the way I structured my feedback. I wanted to address the time spent giving feedback, and move away from the notion of 'correcting'. I wanted to provide feedback which would help inform future learning. I decided to continue exploring and developing written feedback, and record at least one piece of feedback with room for my students to 'action' or 'respond to' the feedback given.

Although I have always shared the learning intentions of lessons with students, I wanted to ensure this was made more explicit. In addition, I wanted to structure feedback around these specific learning intentions. I believed that by ensuring the objective of the lesson was clear, feedback centring on this intention would allow for more meaningful feedback. It should be timely and relevant to the concepts taught and also encourage connections and self-reflections to be made by the students themselves.

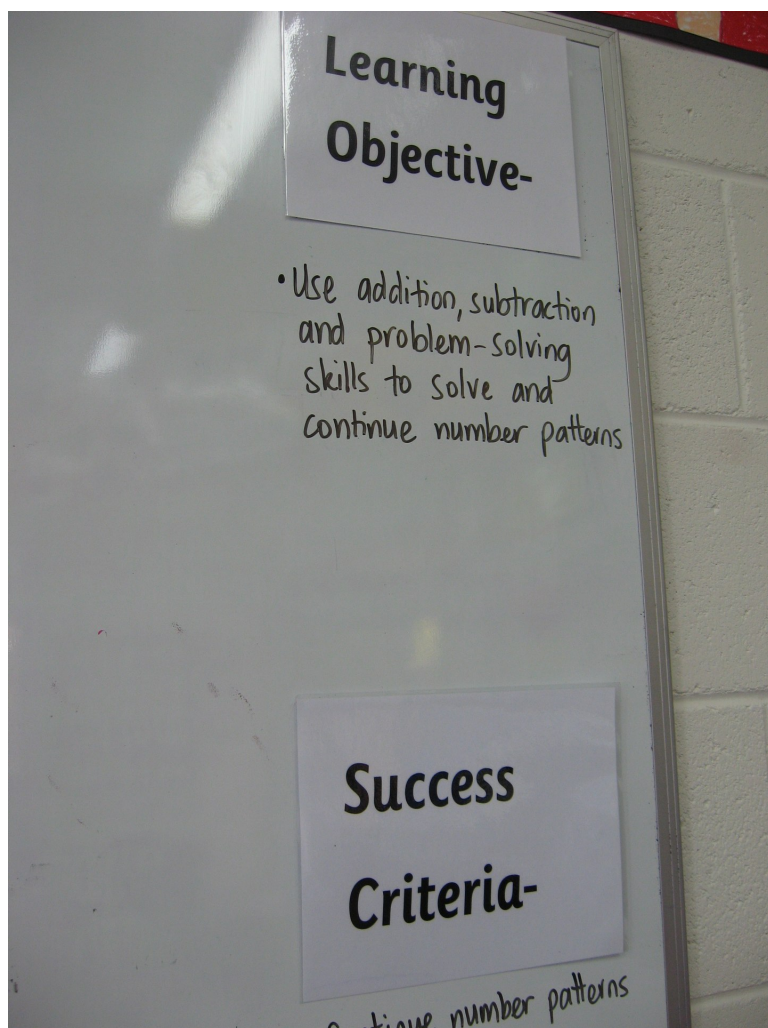
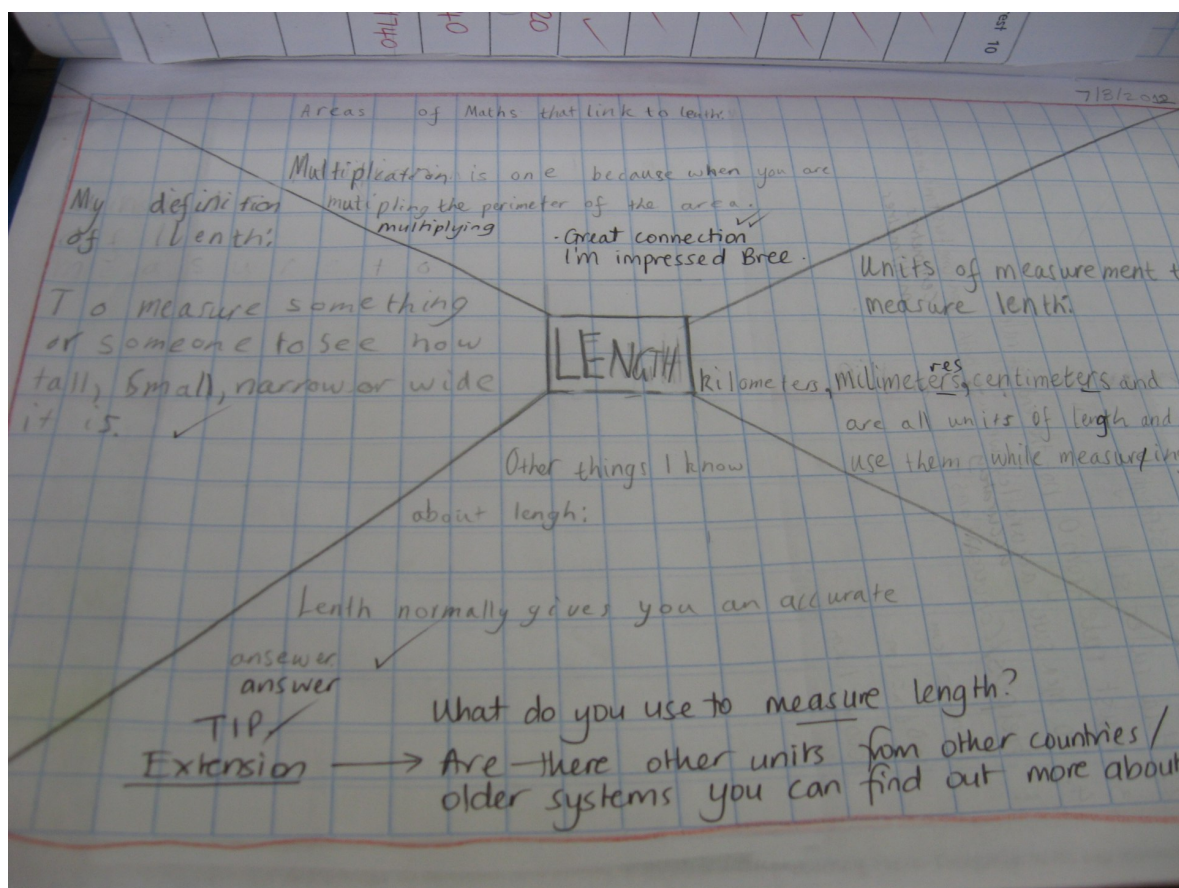


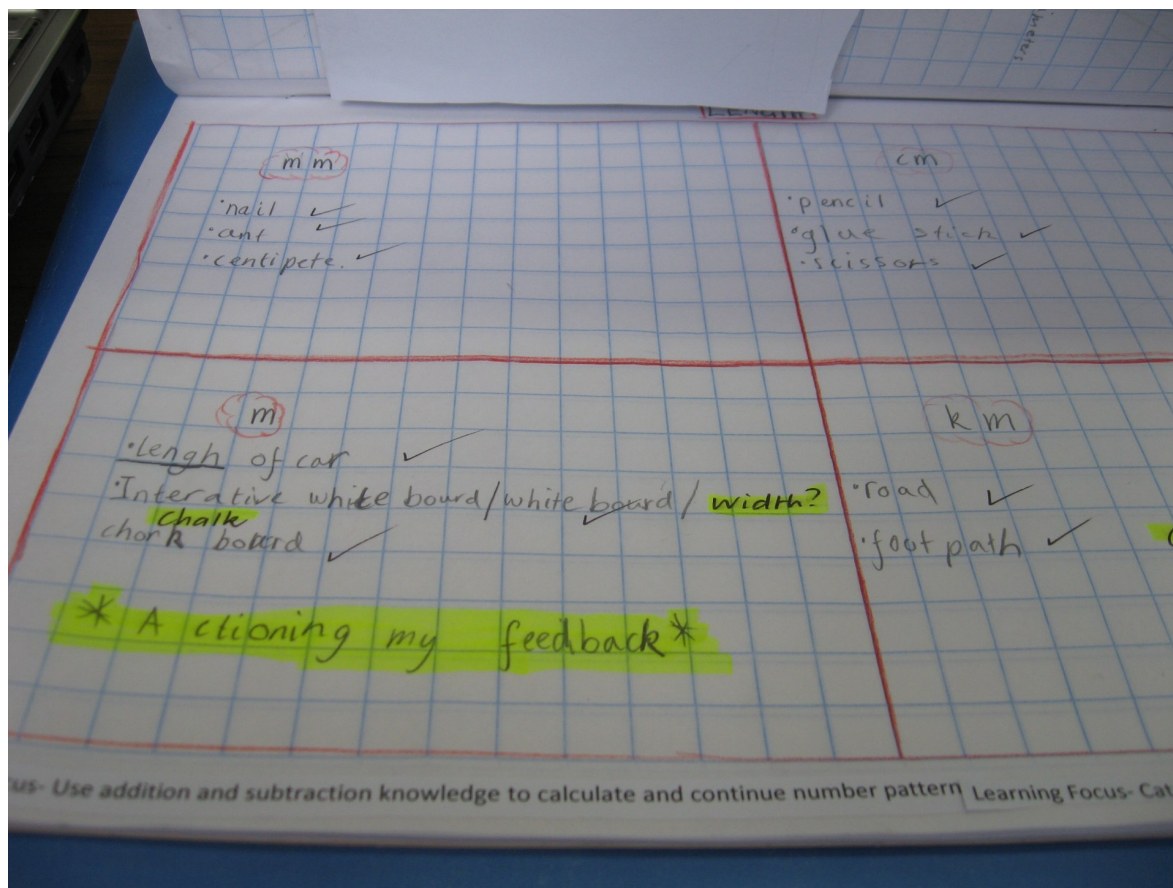
Figure 8: Image of the learning intention and success criteria for viewing by students

Effective feedback includes allocating regular time to discuss the feedback given and opportunity for students to ask and answer questions. Equally important is the identification of future steps for improvement and action (Clarke, 2002^{viii})

Making feedback count

One specific example of this process was during our exploration of length. We began by using a 'think board' to showcase prior knowledge. Using these thoughts as a springboard, my students were provided with a copy of our lesson's learning intention to paste into their books. (Learning Intention- Use a ruler to measure accurately'). We discussed the correct way to use a ruler, then the students were asked to read measurements to the millimetre. Subsequent lessons focussed on units of measurement, leading into studies of area and perimeter.





Figures 9 & 10: Student work books showing learning intentions and student action on feedback

The students received feedback based on the learning intention only. They responded extremely well and, after additional discussions, verbalised their wish that this be the norm in our classroom.

I continued to use the approach of making learning intentions link clearly to the feedback. The learning intention of the next task was 'Use the correct structure and features to write a narrative piece'. Whilst this objective was very broad, we discussed the success criteria by which students could achieve this task. We looked at a narrative piece together and highlighted specific features. We read a variety of narrative texts and recorded the common elements of structure, and we completed a joint construction of a short story. We also reviewed exemplar narratives used as a benchmark. Following these steps students drafted and published their narratives independently.

It was at this point I was able to address my next challenge- to provide my students with the time to action their feedback. The week that followed was

abuzz with some students busy inserting paragraphs where they should have been, others reviewing their use (or lack of) action verbs and adjectives, and some editing their tense to ensure it was consistent. Subsequent learning intentions on their writing were modified to account for prior feedback and the action that had been taken to address the suggestions made.

My goal was to ensure I made a continued effort to allow time for students to respond to feedback. I needed to think carefully about the ways to do this. Conferencing, editing and use of critical friends initially sprung to mind, so I decided to start with these methods.

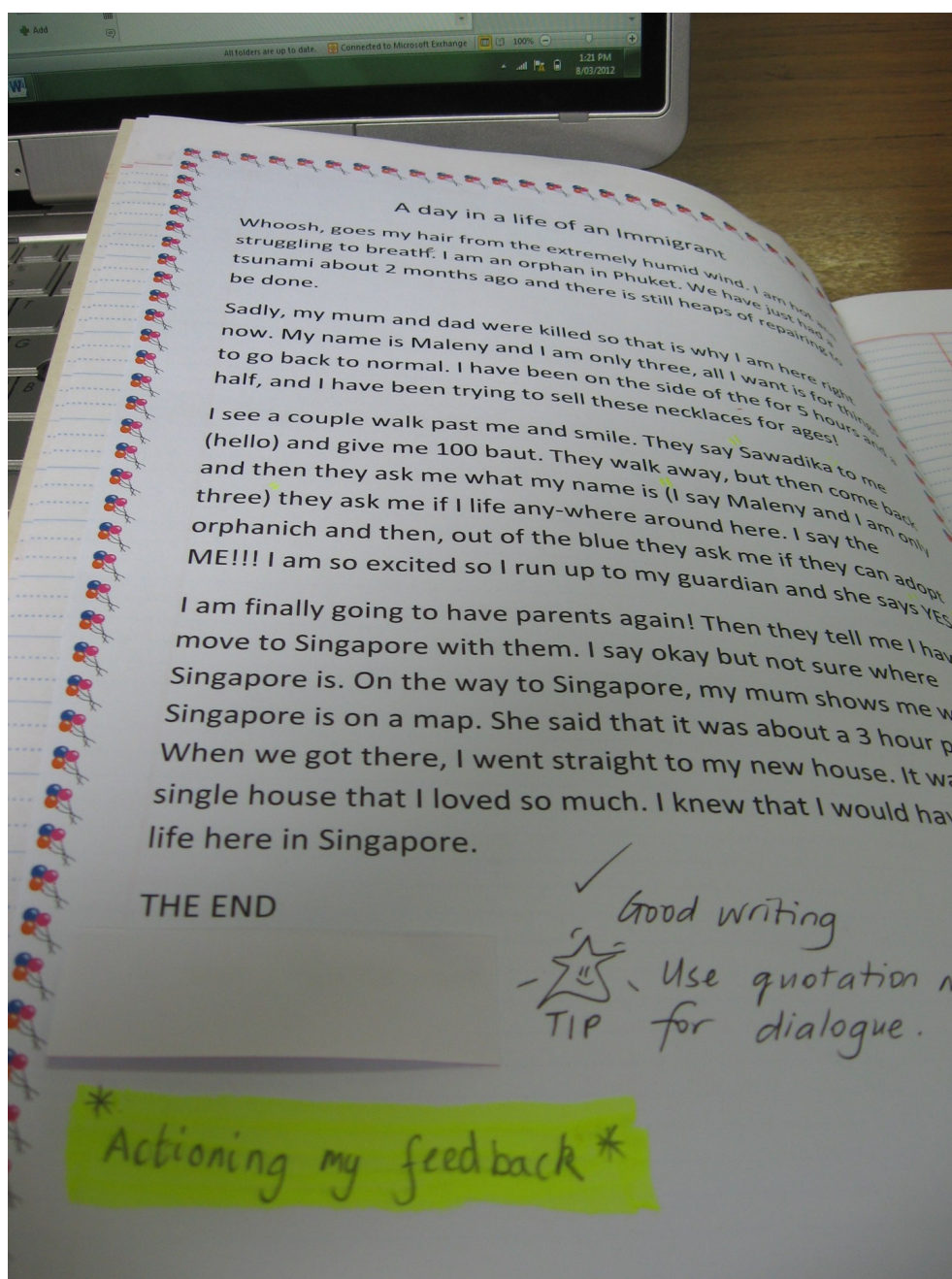


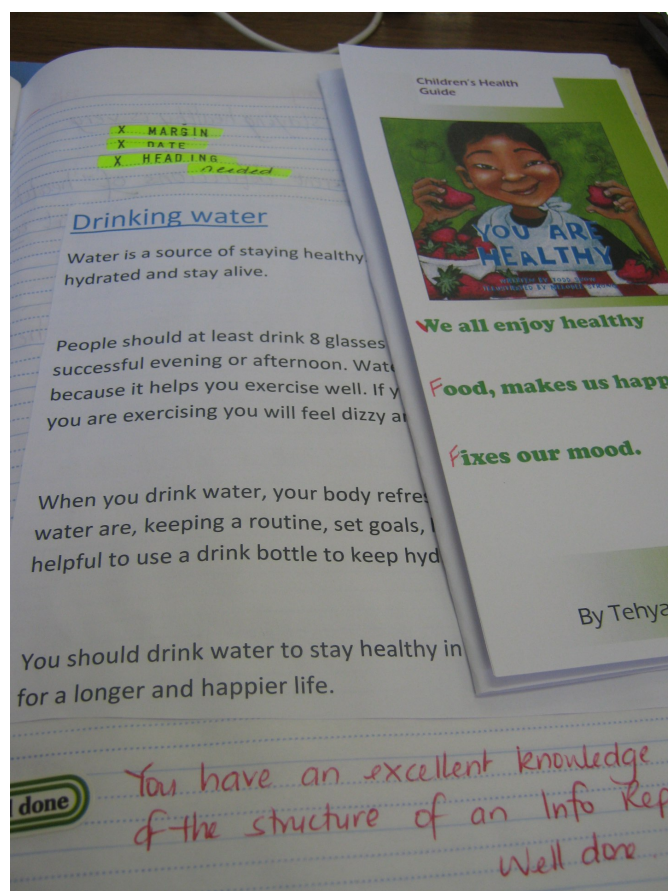
Figure 11: Image of narrative writing piece with feedback and action taken

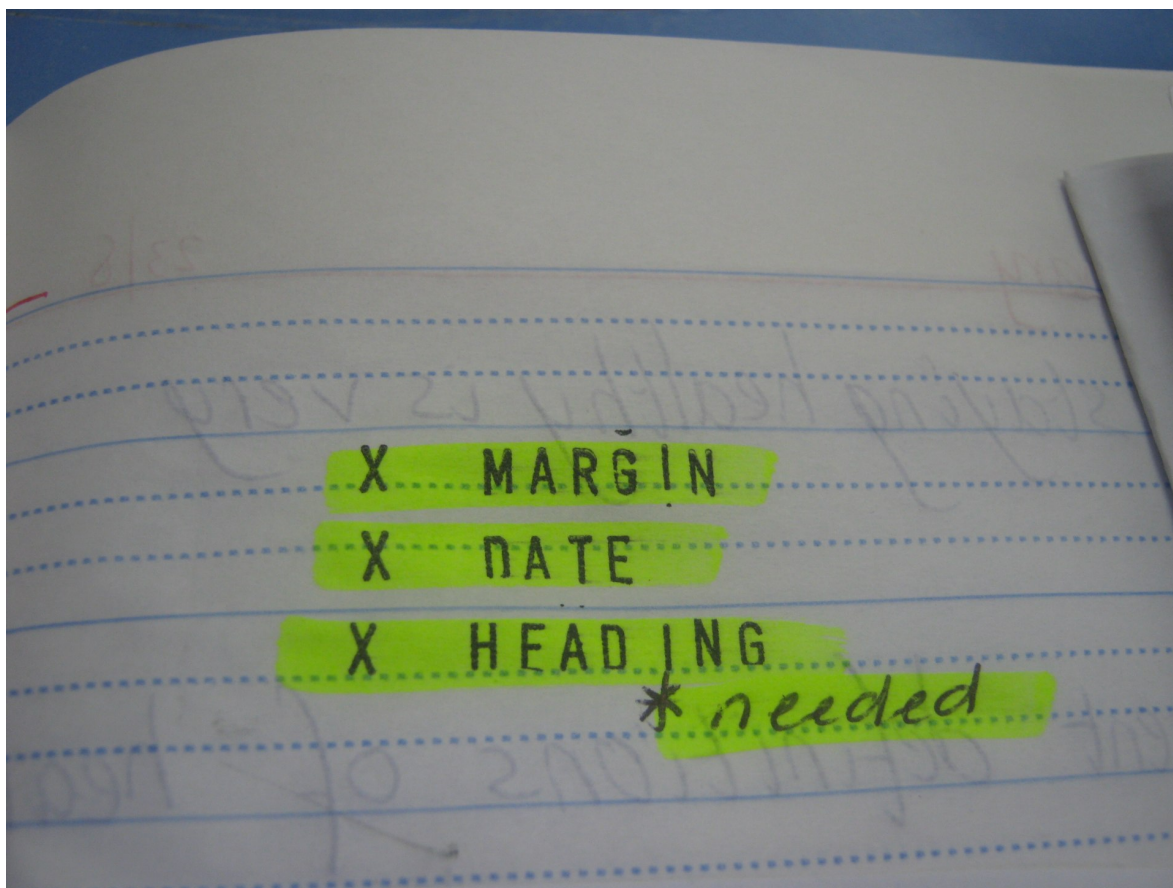
Acknowledging the struggles

There will be ongoing struggles in refining the giving and receiving of feedback. One such struggle is finding a balance between centring feedback around the learning intention and having scope to move students forward by offering 'tips' for next time. This might include extension opportunities and the need for review or follow up with a teacher.

Throughout my work with students, I also found it extremely hard to resist commenting on the mundane (and seemingly unhelpful) elements of student work samples. Although we agreed that praise still played a role in the feedback we wanted to exchange, I also wanted to have the opportunity to comment on presentation such as the omission of a margin, date or heading.

A timely discussion with a colleague provided me with an extremely helpful 'quick fix'. I purchased a stamp to provide a quick reminder about elements of presentation. I believed this a solution to my problem, yet still provided students with the needed expectation reminders about the way in which their work was to be presented and published. Although I deemed the content more important, I wanted to ensure students were completing their work with pride.





Figures 12 & 13: Images of the presentation stamp

Modelling good feedback

My next job was to plan ways in which I could model good feedback and encourage students to use feedback themselves, both for self-reflection and peer response purposes. My first attempt at making this more explicit was through an oral presentation task. Students were given a set of guidelines and an assessment rubric prior to the task. (See Appendix 1)

After completing their presentation, students were encouraged to review their performance. Students made specific notes on areas of strengths and areas requiring further attention. Students were then allocated a 'critical friend'. As critical friends the students appraised the work of their partner. The aim of this appraisal was to help address specific areas of which to concentrate on when preparing for their next presentation. (See Appendix 2)

The statements made to each other were kind, thoughtful and focussed. They also tended to echo the sentiments of the presenters themselves

'I know I need to project my voice clearer next time' Imogen

'I spoke too fast, so my audience missed some of what I was saying' Millie

'I used PowerPoint well, but I need to try not to read from it directly during my presentation' Evan

Throughout the term my students continued to use a combination of teacher, self and peer feedback. This provided them with ample opportunity to move their learning forward and act on advice to help improve their work. It was at this point I decided to reflect on how I could continue to improve the area of feedback in my teaching.

So am I done?

Despite structuring my feedback in a much more meaningful manner, I need to continue to make the provision of feedback an ongoing priority. Equally, I need to persist with providing students with adequate time to act on feedback received by their teachers and peers.

Upon reflection, it is my goal to continue offering feedback in a variety of ways. More specifically, I want to provide written feedback (for student and parent referral) but also make more regular use of oral feedback. I also aim to also explore recording feedback and make greater connections to our schools on line progress reporting.

I believe feedback to be one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement. I aim to foster and maintain a classroom culture where feedback and learning is visible and valued, a learning environment where feedback is an inherent part of learning and of development.

Most importantly, I want my students to know what 'good feedback' is and how to allow it to move their learning forward. I want to create a classroom culture that encourages students to actively seek feedback and be prepared to act on it and learn from it.

Rebecca Ratu is in her thirteenth year of teaching, currently working in a Melbourne Independent School. Her past experiences have included working in the United Kingdom as well as holding the position of PYP / Curriculum Coordinator at her previous school.

This is Rebecca's second year with the Writing Stories group. She completed a paper on 'Student and Teacher Questioning' in 2011 which led to her interest and further exploration into the role teacher feedback plays in learning.

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- iii Martin (1977) Martin, D.L. "Your Praise Can Smother Learning." *LEARNING* 5(6) (1977): 43-51.
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